

The Way It Was

NAME: Larry J. Ponza

UNIT:

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SOURCE: Sent by Mr. Ponza in an effort to locate the paintings.

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THE SAINT MOTHER CABRINI SHRINE/CHAPEL

During the course of World War II, the American and Allied forces defeated the German and Italian armies in North Africa, and many Germans and Italians were taken prisoner and removed and contained in prison camps in the United States of America and its territories. A large group of Italian prisoners were sent to the island of Oahu, in what was at that time the territory of Hawaii, and held in a large prison camp near Schofield Barracks in the high plain pineapple growing area.



This prisoner contingent was highly skilled in construction and engineering, and as a voluntary effort they were used extensively on many construction projects around the island where skilled labor was, at that time, in short supply, particularly around Honolulu Harbor, Sand Island, etc. As these prisoners would return daily to their prison barracks after a days work they would bring back with them whatever excess construction materials they could gather. They stockpiled them until they finally had sufficient material to start to build their own religious chapel, which they decided to dedicate to the memory of Mother Cabrini, who was at that time

being considered for sainthood for her earlier good works in the United States, and who was subsequently canonized as the first American saint by the Vatican around the year 1946.

With permission from the prison authorities, the prisoners, having qualified architects and engineers amongst their officer staff, designed and started to build a shrine and chapel on part of a pineapple field across the road and adjoining the prison complex. Finally completed, the chapel was a very beautiful and imposing structure, as can be seen by the photographs on the reverse side, with a beautiful altar and decorated with two large magnificent oil paintings of Mother Cabrini, painted by the prisoners themselves. The chapel had a full basement for vestments and religious articles, and a large area out in the open in front of the chapel was paved and filled with well constructed concrete benches acting as pews for a thousand or more worshipers that could attend a mass ceremony.



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Upon the chapel's completion, Sunday mass was celebrated every week with the prisoners exiting the prison compound in order to attend the services, seating themselves in the open air pews. As word spread to the adjoining areas, Pearl City, Honolulu, Nanakuli, and even as far as Waikiki, a small group of Catholic worshipers started to drive up to the chapel on Sunday mornings to attend the services. In a short time worshipers came in larger numbers and the attendance swelled to crowds well beyond the seating capacity, and then standing room only became the norm.

Sunday morning mass at the Mother Cabrini Chapel continued to be a pleasant and popular experience to many Catholic worshipers up until around May 8, 1945, when the war ended in Europe, and all prisoners, both German and Italian were repatriated. The Italian prisoners in Hawaii were quickly evacuated and repatriated to Europe. The large prison compound with its huge barbed wire enclosure and tall watch towers were tom down and all evidence of its existence quickly removed. Only the little white chapel with its forlorn rows of pews remained in the open field across the road, to fade away into history.



Many months later, the author of this vignette, then living in Waikiki and having attended services at the Cabrini Chapel a number of times during its active existence, decided to drive up to the old prison site to see what had become of the chapel, fully expecting to find that it had been demolished along with the prison camp. I found a very lonely and desolate area where the prison camp had been. No one was around this rather remote area and all traces of the large prison compound with its barbed wire and watch towers were gone; but across the street in the pineapple field the chapel was still standing. The seating

benches or pews were gone, and the entire area was overgrown with weeds as can be seen by the accompanying photos. Wind had blown debris all over the area. It was a desolate scene. However, when I went up into the chapel itself I was very surprised to find the after area in excellent condition with the religious materials still in place and on the back wall two very large paintings honoring Mother Cabrini, photos of these oil paintings also are included in this vignette. Also on the altar was a very large leather-bound memorial album, which had the signatures of every prisoner that had contributed to the building of the chapel, with rank, serial number, and home town address. It appeared to include thousands of names. I wondered how this remarkable journal had



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survived out in the open chapel for the many months since the chapel was abandoned and how the altar area had remained in such remarkable condition with the general area being in such a desolated condition, and why had such beautiful large oil paintings of Mother Cabrini been abandoned and left to the vagaries of the elements and potential vandalism.

I felt a strong impulse to somehow save the paintings, the journal and the religious articles by taking them with me and saving them for posterity, but I decided that Someone connected with the Catholic Church in the territory of Hawaii must be aware of these religious icons, particularly the paintings of Mother Cabrini, who was at that time

being considered for sainthood, and was actually canonized in 1946, and would be aware of the condition of the abandoned chapel. With a last nostalgic look around the area, I took a few photographs, which are shown in this vignette, and returned to Honolulu, to Waikiki.

As the next few days passed. I found myself thinking more and more about the journal and the religious articles that I had seen in the now abandoned chapel. These items were too historically important to be left to deteriorate into oblivion in the deserted pineapple fields of Hawaii's highlands. I decided that on the following weekend I would return to the old prison site and rescue these artifacts and preserve them for a future time.

The following Sunday I drove back up to the lonely site, eagerly anticipating saving these artifacts, but when I arrived at the chapel, I was stunned to find that the items I had come to rescue were gone. They had survived for many months untouched, but one week after my initial visit, someone had removed the journal, all religious artifacts from the altar area, and also the magnificent oil paintings of Mother Cabrini, shown in the attached photos. I returned to Waikiki shaken by the coincidence, and although I made a number of inquiries as to what may have happened to these artifacts, I was unable to learn anything about their disappearance.

I returned home to Santa Cruz, California, in 1959, and during the last 50 years I have many times thought about the little chapel in Hawaii, and wondered if some responsible persons saved these artifacts or have these artifacts been retained by the Catholic clergy in Hawaii. The journal itself would be of great value to those men that built the chapel/shrine to honor the first American saint, Saint Mother Cabrini, although today they would all be in the twilight of their lives.

I continue to wonder if the beautiful paintings shown in the attached photographs are hanging in some place of worship, or were they destroyed by mindless vandals many years ago. There will be no resolution to these questions, however, by documenting the story of the last days of the Saint Mother Cabrini Shrine/Chapel and the Hawaiian Island of Oahu, I feel that I am bringing closure to a very significant historical incident in our time and place.